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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent research on English spelling and the alphabet, and examines the alphabet in terms of symbols, letter-names, and sounds. English is considerably less phonetic than most Western languages, with many symbols having more than one sound. This factor makes spelling difficult for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) or Foreign Language (EFL). The recognition that the alphabet has three distinct identities, as a group of symbols, letter-names, and sounds, not only leads to better understanding of the role of the alphabet, but also helps in a better understanding of the manner in which the three identities relate to the acquisition of different language skills, including spelling. Such understanding becomes even more important in the instruction of language minority, ESL, and EFL students. Elementary and secondary curriculum and instruction should clearly define the objectives and teaching strategies that are most appropriate for the implementation of the three identities and their functions within one language and across languages. (MDM)

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THE ALPHABET AND SPELLING CONNECTION :*

INSIGHTS FROM NON-NATIVE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, we tend to think of the alphabet as a mono-dimensional entity. This causes extensive confusion in its actual application. The confusion is most vivid in teaching spelling. To avoid the ensuing confusion this study calls for the recognition of three different identities for the alphabet as symbols, letter-names and sounds each of which serves one or more different functions. The study also highlights the need for the recognition of an Oral-Graphic dichotomy of spelling which in turn will help in a better understanding of the alphabet as a tool, and spelling as a process especially in situations involving non-native learners of English.

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THE ALPHABET AND SPELLING CONNECTION :*

INSIGHTS FROM NON-NATIVE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Spelling in English is difficult. This is a fact that needs no further discussion; instead, the discussion and research should be concentrated on how to teach it systematically and successfully despite its difficulty. In reality, this has been the trend for the last three decades during which extensive research was produced to help shed light on the nature of spelling as a developmental process which requires a wide range of cognitive processes to be activated through visual, auditory, tactile and kinesthetic manipulations and feedbacks. Templeton's studies (1986, 1991a, 1991b) contain rich bibliographies for any investigator intending to pursue the recent and current research in spelling.

Most of the research in spelling has evolved and expanded along the lines of the recent developments in the fields of linguistics, cognitive psychology and developmental psychology (Henderson and Templeton, 1986) with each of those fields helping to clarify one or more aspects of spelling and the best way of handling its learning/teaching. Templeton (1986:77) highlights the major areas of research on spelling as follows:

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* I would like to express my deep gratitude to my colleagues, professors Janet Bercik and Beverly Otto for their constructive comments on this paper.

- Learning how to spell follows a developmental progression.
- Learning how to spell is primarily a conceptual process rather than a rote memorization process.
- Words selected for study should reflect students' level of conceptual understanding of words as well as the frequency of the words and word patterns.
- Learning to spell depends on integration with the other language arts of reading, writing and vocabulary development.
- Linguistically, the spelling system of English makes a great deal of sense when viewed from the perspective of how well it represents meaning rather than simply how well it represents sound (c.f. Hodges, 1981:11-13).

The above research highlights have brought with them a broad range of learning/teaching techniques which are multisensory and multicognitive in nature. Tarasoff (1990) expounds an excellent collection of those strategies to which, undoubtedly, any innovative teacher can readily add.

A crucial question at this juncture is: how much of this recent research and the ensuing teaching techniques have found their way into the classroom? Apparently the answer is: not so much. According to Wilde (1990:280) "...new knowledge about spelling development and a broader view of spelling in the classroom have not for the most part replaced the traditional curriculum." Manning and Manning have identified this lack of

connection between theoretical research and its classroom application even earlier on and more emphatically:

> ".....since the early 1970s significant breakthroughs occurred to help us understand how children develop as spellers. Unfortunately, those understandings have not reached into actual classroom practice" (1985:5).

Besides this lack of exposure of the classroom to research findings, there are still some basic facts related to the alphabet as a tool of spelling and to spelling as a process which are rarely raised and discussed as relevant. It is those facts and their impact on the teaching of the alphabet and its connection with spelling that are the focus of this study.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

When any average educated person who is not linguistically sophisticated is asked as to what the alphabet characters (letters) stand for, the predominant response is that they stand for sounds. In theory, this is what they are meant to represent primarily, but unfortunately the representation among languages is not always so systematic and neat. An almost ideal matching exists in Finnish where a single letter of the alphabet is used to stand for a single sound (Pei, 1963:79). A highly consistent matching also exists in Spanish since there is virtually a one-to-one correspondence between the letters of the alphabet and the phonemes of the language (Finnegan and Besnier, 1989:373; Dalbor, 1969:1). In English, however, the matching is highly inconsistent when compared with Spanish and several other languages. Thus, an exclusive

identification of the characters with sounds may interfere with the proper, systematic and efficient teaching of the alphabet and spelling. Further, in order to better understand the role of the alphabet in language instruction, and its connection with spelling, some elaboration on both the alphabet and spelling seems inevitable.

THE ALPHABET

In most languages using an alphabetic system of writing, the characters tend to have three different identities with each having a different function or functions to serve. The three identities portray themselves in the form of symbols, letter-names and sounds.

The characters a, b, c, d ... are mere symbols when they are used in the serial order in which they appear in the alphabet. Typically, this identity is used in sequencing be it enumeration or categorization. For instance, instead of sequencing certain facts as: 1, 2, 3, 4 ... one has the option of stating them as: a, b, c, d. Additionally, the manner in which entries in the dictionary are arranged is also a form of sequencing. In both those cases, the sounds of those characters need not be invoked. In the dictionary, the words cat and city come under the c symbol regardless of the fact that the former c represents a [k] sound while the latter represents an [s] sound.

The characters also carry specific names known as letter-names which are neither segmental sounds in the phonetic/phonemic sense of the word nor are they mere symbols. This is why Venezky (1979) contends that letter-names do not contain the sounds taught in

phonics. Actually, they may or may not contain the sounds they are traditionally associated with depending on the type of the letter-name. The letter-names are more like monosyllabic words that function as units in a system of nomenclature. Hence letter-names should not be confused with sounds. To illustrate, the letter-names bee, dee, ef do contain the sounds[b], [d], [f], but with an additional vocalic element attached to them. The letter-names cee, gee do contain the [s] and [ǰ] sounds, whereas their [k] and [g] sound variants are missing. As for aitch and double u, for example, the letter-names give no indication of their [h] and [w] sounds, respectively. Thus, the letter-name identity clearly distinguishes itself from the symbolic (letter) identity as it was presented above and from its phonetic (sound) identity as it will be presented below.

Ideally, the characters are meant to form a one-to-one relationship with sounds. Unfortunately, for many reasons, this balanced matching is no longer holding in many languages. For instance, English displays a high degree of inconsistency which "leads to a diversity of spellings for the same sounds, and, conversely, different pronunciations for the same letters or combinations of letters (Anderson and Lapp, 1988:194). This however, should not be interpreted as a complete lack of consistency. Hanna and Moore reported that the system of writing in English is still basically alphabetic and that in teaching spelling, "we must take advantage of the fact that for almost every sound in the language there is what might be called a 'highly

regular' spelling (1953:330). For instance, although the letter a may have different phonetic realizations such as [ə], [æ], [ɑ], [e] and [ɔ] (Allen, 1968:600) in the context of about, apple, father, able and all, the short [æ] sound is still frequently spelled with an a symbol.

In any case, when English is compared with Spanish, the latter is considerably more 'phonetic' in representing both the vowels and the consonants. To cite just one example, unlike the above five different phonetic realizations of the character a in English, Spanish a symbol has invariably the phonetic value of [a] and so do the rest of the vowels in Spanish. (Bowen and Stockwell, 1965:27; Politzer and Staubach, 1965:70)

THE SPELLING

It is rare to come across a definition for spelling. However, Hanna et al (1982) do define it as "the process of encoding, or of rendering spoken words into written symbols." A careful scrutiny of this definition will reveal that it is not comprehensive and exhaustive of the practices we engage in when spelling. It is, indeed, a process of encoding spoken words, but not necessarily in written symbols. In spelling bee competitions and in spelling a word or name during a telephone conversation for the sake of accurate encoding, the speller does not necessarily use written or graphic symbols. In other words, the speller does not resort to the first identity of the alphabet; rather, he/she resorts to its second identity which is the letter-names. In fact, much of our classroom spelling practice is based on the letter-names.

Thus, it seems that in order to render the above-cited definition more comprehensive and representative, a rewording of it to read "a process of encoding of spoken words in written symbols or in letter-names" seems in order. The redefinition implies the need for the recognition of two modes of spelling: graphic spelling as opposed to oral spelling which stand for two different processes whose mastery requires the use of different identities of the alphabet that may involve different sensory and cognitive activities.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from the above observations that the alphabet is not monolithic in identity. The recognition of the three well-defined identities as symbols, letter-names and sounds does not only lead to a better understanding of the role of the alphabet, but it also helps in a better understanding of the manner in which the three identities relate to the acquisition of different language skills and subskills including spelling. The failure to recognize the existence of those identities and their functions results in many misconceptions that consequently affect the efficiency and effectiveness of learning/teaching language arts, particularly in situations involving limited English proficient students. Many teachers still think of English and deal with it in terms of the following:

- That English has twenty-six sounds (instead of saying it has twenty-six letters, but many more sounds)
- That English has five vowels (instead of saying it has

five vowel letters, but many more vowel sounds)

- That k and g are two different sounds (instead of saying they are two different letters, but have the same sound)
- That the sound of sh is a blend of the sounds of [s] and [h] (cited in Falk 1973 and rejected as utterly unacceptable)
- That the underlined vowel letters in fuel, cute and glue stand for the long vowel u (cited in Chicago City Colleges' Language Arts textbook and rejected by the present author since the underlined elements represent the sounds of [juə] [ju] and [u], respectively).

Scores of such misstatements and inaccuracies are still repeatedly encountered in print and in our classrooms. This is mainly attributed to teachers' lack of exposure to the insights and findings of modern linguistics concerning the manner in which the spoken and written modes of language interface and are portrayed via the alphabet.

Phonics, which is not a discipline of modern linguistics and is hardly ever encountered within its terminology, is typical in its confusion of the three identities of the alphabet. The mere mention of the existence of five vowels with long and short variants is linguistically untenable because it implies a letter-based approach which does not work well for English whose five vowel letters are so variably and unpredictably used. What complicates the situation even further is the fact that phonics identifies the five long vowels on the basis of their letter-names

(Leu and Kinzer, 1991:185), whereas the short ones are, usually, identified by their sounds. Thus, when the so-called long versus short vowels of phonics are phonetically transcribed there is hardly any grounds for justifying the long/short relationship on the basis of vowel quality, which is the major distinctive factor in vowel description and matching. In Table 1, the phonetic transcription reveals how the qualitative difference between the so-called long/short vowels has been concealed by the letter-based identification of vowels that phonics resorts to:

Table 1

Phonics		Phonetics	
Short Vowels	Long Vowels	Short Vowels	Long Vowels
fĭn	fīne	[fIn]	[faIn] or [fayn]
făt	fāte	[fæt]	[fet] or [feyt]
bĕt	bēet	[bɛt]	[bit] or [biyt]
hŏp	hōpe	[hɑp]	[hop] or [howp]

The dependence of phonics on letters also obscures the phonetic identification of the syllables and the process of syllabication both of which may conflict with the actual rules of pronunciation. If according to some proponents of phonics "a syllable is a unit of pronunciation" (Baer, 1991:97) and if "the reason we teach syllabication in reading at all is so that students can determine the pronunciation" (Templeton, 1991:292) then phonic syllabication may yield opposite results in certain cases and may even promote mispronunciation. Consider the case of almost all

non-compound English words that have doubled letters. The phonic syllabication of butter, comment and applaud as "but - ter", "com - ment", " ap - plaud" instead of their actual syllabication in pronunciation as [bʌt . er], [kɑm . ɛnt], [ə. plɔd] may yield unrealistic syllabic structures and patterns and retain letters which are not actually pronounced.

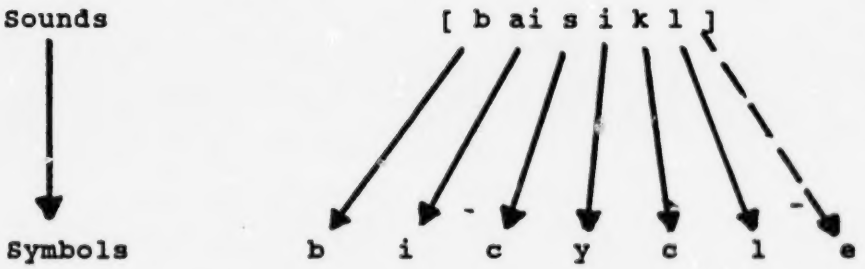
As for spelling, the distinction between its graphic and oral modes should be recognized as part of the language arts instructional plan despite the fact that the former is more frequently used and is, perhaps, more important in the overall acquisition of literacy. It is perhaps because of those two characteristics that graphic spelling is often taken to represent spelling per se. This may also account for Hanna et al's definition of spelling as an exclusively graphic activity. Nevertheless, the distinction is justified not only because oral spelling constitutes an activity that every literate child or adult resorts to from time to time, but also because it utilizes the alphabet in a fashion that is different than in graphic spelling. As demonstrated in Figure 1, with graphic spelling, the speller transforms sounds into symbols, whereas with oral spelling he/she transforms symbols into letter-names. Instructionally, these differences also imply the need for different teaching and learning strategies depending on the sensory channels and cognitive processes required with each spelling mode.

A common observation in classes with students of limited English proficiency is the difficulty the learners - including even

those who are highly literate in their native language and use the same latin alphabet that English uses - experience when asked to spell orally some of the simplest words or even their first names and surnames. The overall difficulty arises not because those learners are unfamiliar with the symbols, but rather because they are unfamiliar with the letter-names of those symbols in English. The difficulty the Hispanic students and other non-native learners of English experience in oral spelling is a very common phenomenon in our language arts classes and in all classes where the learning of English is involved. With regard to oral spelling, the difficulty portrays itself in the form of hesitation, indecision and confusion simply because the learners are undergoing a state of mental transformation of letter-names from the native language into English.

Figure 1

Graphic Spelling



Oral Spelling

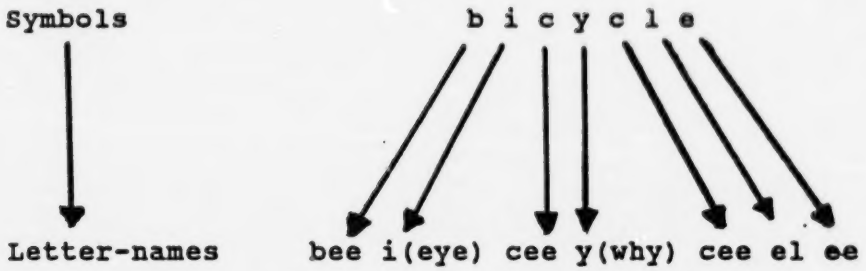


Figure 2. Graphic and Oral Spelling differences and their alphabet identity usage.

In addition to this mismatch in letter-naming across languages that directly impacts oral spelling, oral spelling, by nature, tends to be more cognitively demanding than graphic spelling since the speller has to execute the following steps:

a. Visualize the word as a whole,

b. Visualize the sequence of the symbols within the word,

c. Sound out the letter-names of the symbols, and

d. Remember the point at which he/she is in the sequence of letter-naming i.e. remember what he/she has already letter-named and what awaits to be letter-named.

In graphic spelling, steps a and b are the same as in oral spelling, but step c is replaced with the writing of the symbols an activity that in itself renders step d redundant because the speller can see the portion of the word that he/she has already written down. The absence of the last step alleviates the burden on the memory and makes graphic spelling cognitively less demanding. It is precisely because of this fact that many spellers who are confronted with oral spelling situations prefer to resort to graphic spelling to facilitate the process of symbol sequencing. This move to avoid oral spelling becomes more common in Bilingual and ESL classes especially when the learner has not yet developed an automatic mastery of the letter-names. Otto (personal communication, 1992) made the observation that in some classrooms spelling tests are "corrected" in a whole class activity when the teacher orally "spells" the words. In her view, this is probably a very confusing task for Bilingual and LEP students.

SUMMARY AND INSTRUCTIONAL IMPLICATIONS

A more comprehensive and systematic understanding of the nature of the alphabet, its three identities as symbols, letter-names and sounds and their specific functions in the teaching of various language skills and subskills should be an essential part of our language arts curriculum and instructional plan. Such understanding becomes even more imperative in situations involving language minority students whose presence in our regular classrooms is steadily increasing.

The curriculum and the instruction should clearly spell out the objectives and the teaching and learning strategies that are most appropriate for the implementation of the identities and their functions within one language and across languages. With such an approach, one will not only secure a more realistic understanding of a major tool of language instruction, but may also minimize the misconceptions that many of our teachers and students are unduly exposed to during the process of language teaching/learning.

The multidimensional alphabet-spelling connection should no longer be misconceived as a unidimensional one. The connection is both graphic and oral leading to the need for the recognition of an Oral-Graphic dichotomy in spelling. This dichotomy helps in highlighting a more intricate relationship between the alphabet as a tool and spelling as a process.

A major implication of such a trend is the need for the enhancement and updating of our language arts training programs that will enable the teachers to acquire such knowledge and

implement it in their classes.

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